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Prokofiev Cantata

for the 20th Anniversary of the

October Revolution

Kirill Karabits

Ernst Senff Chor Berlin
Staatskapelle Weimar

Deutschlandfunk Kultur

Kunstfest Weimar

audite

Sergei PROKOFIEV

CANTATA for the 20th Anniversary of the OCTOBER REVOLUTION

I.	Prelude "A spectre is haunting Europe" *Moderato – Allegro*	*2:27*
II.	The Philosophers. *Andante assai*	*2:18*
III.	Interlude. *Allegro – Andante – Adagio*	*1:18*
IV.	Choir: "A tight little band..." *Allegretto*	*2:19*
V.	Interludium. *Tempestoso*	*1:21*
VI.	Revolution. *Andante non troppo – Più mosso – Allegro moderato – (Precipitato) – Adagio molto*	*9:31*
VII.	Victory: "Comrades, we are approaching spring..." *Andante*	*5:00*
VIII.	The Oath. *Andante pesante*	*6:07*
IX.	Symphony. *Allegro energico – Meno mosso*	*6:17*
X.	The Constitution. *Andante assai – Andante molto*	*5:09*

Ernst Senff Chor Berlin
Staatskapelle Weimar
members of the Luftwaffenmusikkorps Erfurt

Kirill Karabits, conductor

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Prokofiev's Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution in its context

The twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution coincided with the centenary of Alexander Pushkin's death, making the year 1937 a high point of Soviet culture which was used by politicians to stimulate patriotic works of all kinds. During the same year, the "Great Purge" under Stalin reached its gruesome peak. The silent fear must have seized the entire population: the terror stretched from liquidating Lenin's old guard, as well as the vanguard of the Red Army, through to capital punishment for youths from the age of twelve and camp imprisonment or deportation for unauthorised absences or repeated tardiness at the workplace. All this must have left its marks on that year's works of art, be it in the form of exaggerated optimism or in the form of enigmatic ambiguity as in Dmitri Shostakovich's middle symphonies.

Sergei Prokofiev, who settled permanently in Moscow with his family in the summer of 1936, had thoroughly acquainted himself with the situation and knew which country he had entered. The decision to return to the Soviet Union had come to fruition when Prokofiev realised that Sergei Rachmaninov had become the leading Russian musician in the USA and Igor Stravinsky the leading Russian musician in Western Europe. The first position amongst Soviet composers seemed to have been vacated when Shostakovich had become a non-person in early 1936, following the *Pravda* article "Muddle instead of Music" (a damning review of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* which had incurred Stalin's disapproval). The premiere of his fifth symphony in late 1937 brought about his rehabilitation. The regime would have made a return tempting to the internationally renowned Prokofiev by granting him certain privileges and permitting him to travel abroad, which he was able to do until 1938. For his part, Prokofiev indicated his cooperation to the organs of the press: his emphatic declaration of love of his native country matched the national patriotism which had been officially proclaimed in the new constitution of 5 December 1936. By repeatedly asserting his intention of adapting his personal style towards a simple and song-like idiom, he deliberately made recourse to official definitions of Socialist Realism in music.

Contemplating Prokofiev's Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution in the context of his works written around that time, it becomes apparent that he was determined to become a Soviet composer. He wanted to fall into line and must, at that point, have been of the conviction that a simplification and a more emotional approach would match his aesthetics. An orientation towards a more expressive idiom whilst using straightforward forms had been an international trend since the early 1930s to which numerous composers subscribed, most prominently those of the Jeune France movement, which included a young Olivier Messiaen. Prokofiev's oeuvre mirrors this international trend whilst paying homage to official Soviet taste. In 1935, he wrote *Six Songs* for voice or unison choir and piano (Op. 66), including two mass songs, "Partisan Zheleznyak" and "Anyutka", which won the second prize at a mass song competition organised by the party organ *Pravda* in 1936. *Romeo and Juliet* (Op. 64), the ballet project on which he began working in 1935, politically innocuous and elegantly written, was first performed in Brno in 1938. It is not known why the Soviet premiere of this work, today considered to be a twentieth century classic, was delayed until 1940. It is thought that the director, Sergei Radlov, had fallen from favour at the time. The suites which Prokofiev promptly assembled from the

ballet score were published without delay and met with immediate popularity. For the Pushkin anniversary year of 1937 Prokofiev contributed a number of works: the film score for an adaptation of *The Queen of Spades* (Op. 70), two sets of incidental music (*Boris Godunov*, Op. 70a, and *Eugene Onegin*, Op. 71) as well as three Pushkin songs (Op. 73) which were broadcast by Moscow radio during 1937.

Prokofiev was cautious in those years; all his press releases were carefully considered. Works which were not played he kept as material for future compositions. Works for children, such as the symphonic fairy tale *Peter and the Wolf* (Op. 67, 1936), which remains internationally popular to the present day, and *Three Children's Songs* (Op. 68, 1936-39) were immediately successful. Then there followed the Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution. Prokofiev's greatest opus of that time after *Romeo and Juliet*, it is a highly ambitious work with a duration of just under an hour. Prokofiev himself compiled the texts to form a dramatic structure, spanning almost a hundred years of revolutionary history from the Communist Manifesto (1848) to the Soviet constitution (1936). At the same time, he presents a stylistic panorama, comprising choral movements and text declamation, some of which appear as pseudo-religious psalmody, as well as three instrumental movements which serve both as moments of reflection and whose symphonic colours also have an illustrative quality. The finale, "The Constitution", is an apotheosis using powerful sounds to express affirmation.

At the same time as the cantata, Prokofiev wrote *Song of Our Days* (Op. 76, 1937), a suite for mezzo-soprano, baritone, choir and orchestra, setting folk texts and verse of admired Soviet poets of the day. This work, whose orchestration is rather milder than that of the cantata, was premiered in early 1938 to great acclaim. Of similar success were Prokofiev's incidental music for *Hamlet* (Op. 77, 1937/38) and his *Seven Songs* (Op. 79, 1939), setting current political texts, including the "Song about the Fatherland", "Stakhanovka" (a homage to the miner Alexey Stakhanov and the campaign named after him which was intended to increase production) and "On the Polar Sea". Prokofiev contributed his "Song about the Fatherland" to a collection of *Songs for Heavy Industry*, published in 1939, where it was positioned at the beginning, immediately after songs paying homage to Lenin and Stalin. *Zdravitsa*, or *A Toast!*, a cantata for choir and orchestra (Op. 85, 1939) was written during the same year for Stalin's sixtieth birthday. Practically all composers and generally all Soviet artists paid homage to Stalin on this occasion. Another major work of this period is the film score to Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938). The congenial opus and the cinematographically highly interesting collaboration between Eisenstein and Prokofiev was a work of propaganda: using the historical example of Alexander Nevsky, who had defeated the Teutonic Knights on 5 April 1242, the film exemplifies the contemporary German aggressor and how he should be dealt with, especially since the German military state of "Ober-Ost" (consisting of parts of today's Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Belarus), designed for colonisation and exploitation, was still fresh in public awareness.

Prokofiev had arrived in the Soviet Union and indicated that he wanted to contribute to the development of his country through his art. *Alexander Nevsky*, *Peter and the Wolf*, the patriotic songs and eventually also the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* proved highly successful. Nonetheless, a remarkable number of works remained unperformed: the *Queen of Spades* film was not realised; *Eugene Onegin* did not make it to the stage; and his incidental music for *Boris Godunov* was only played posthumously in 1960 as a radio production. The revolutionary cantata suffered the same fate. Why?

At a time when every artist, director and intendant had, at worst, to pay for their decisions with their lives, nobody had the courage, understandably, to take responsibility for works about which they did not feel confident. In the cantata, Prokofiev looks towards the rough, harsh style of the period following the October Revolution. Including accordions and percussion in the scoring was part of the aesthetics of the *Proletkult* (proletarian culture) which had been dissolved at the onset of the New Economic Policy in 1921. Noises such as cannon shots, alarm bells, machine guns and sirens formed part of the sonic arsenal of the futurists who were already an anathema to Lenin. Even more grave, however, was Prokofiev's treatment of the texts. The members of the State Committee on the Arts were apparently irritated by the sound of Lenin's speeches in combination with Prokofiev's music. Some censors perceived the mere concept of setting texts by Lenin or Stalin as heresy. "Nobody dared provoke even a shadow of a doubt or displeasure with Stalin, especially after the show trials of 1936-37", according to a more recent analysis.

A study undertaken in 2011 revealed that the members of the committee had suggested to Prokofiev that he adapt, or even better, use different, ideally folk-like, texts. The dispute reached the highest echelons of power – on 4 May 1936, Platon Kerzhentsev, the chairman of the committee, wrote to Vyacheslav Molotov, the then Prime Minister, that Prokofiev had been advised to review his plan. "We have also suggested that he use materials of Soviet poets. He categorically rejected that idea. The conversation ended with Prokofiev's promise to work out and present a different plan." Molotov replied on 17 May 1936: "I suggest you withdraw your objections against the project of the composer Prokofiev and leave the decision over his cantata to his own discretion." That also meant leaving full responsibility with the composer. In fact, Prokofiev did revise the work, rendering the scoring more folk-like; shortly before the date on which he was to re-submit the work to the committee, Prokofiev made further changes. A final thrust for the cantata came in the form of the new constitution which was adopted on 5 December 1936. Now there was the historical perspective of the revolution as well as the history of the Soviet Union. At the same time, Prokofiev extended his scoring to include the futuristic noises which were to represent the effects of battles; the symphonic sections also took shape. At the end of May, Prokofiev finished work on the piano score; the full score was completed by August 1937. On 19 June 1937, a performance (closed to the public) was given in front of the State Committee on the Arts, at which Prokofiev presented his work from the piano, as well as singing himself – apparently very badly. This sealed the cantata's fate. Various other cantatas were played at the festivities commemorating the revolution: there was sufficient choice. Prokofiev accepted the rejection and instead turned his attention towards *Alexander Nevsky* and his new opera project, *Semyon Kotko*.

Dorothea Redepenning
Translation: *Viola Scheffel*

KUNSTFEST WEIMAR

Kunstfest Weimar (Weimar Arts Festival) was initiated in 1990 as one of the first East-West-German cultural projects after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Today it is one of the best known art festivals in Germany. Every summer the Kunstfest brings outstanding examples of contemporary art to Weimar, the history-laden city of German Classicism. The programme features theatre, dance, performances and concerts, as well as visual arts, literature, film and media arts. Internationally acclaimed artists meet the city's young creative scene and transform the streets of Weimar into a stage that is as vivacious as it is inspiring. Since 2014 Kunstfest Weimar is being presented by the Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar.

The festival's main objective is how artists deal with history today. At the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution in 2017, Kunstfest Weimar initiated a search for the traces of Communism that can still be found today.

ERNST SENFF CHOR

The Ernst Senff Choir has been an established institution in Berlin's musical life for many years. Founded initially as a chamber choir in the 1960s by then-choral director of the Städtische Oper Berlin, Ernst Senff, the ensemble developed in the following years into a large and acclaimed concert choir.

In changing formations that range between 20 to over 100 singers of both genders, the professionally-active vocal ensemble dedicates itself to all musical genres and stylistic periods, with a special focus on the 19th century choral symphonic literature and contemporary works.

The Ernst Senff Choir is one of the regular musical partners of the great Berlin orchestras and is also called upon to participate in radio recordings and CD productions. The ensemble's artistic activity has been shaped by its collaboration with such renowned conductors as Ingo Metzmacher, Lothar Zagrosek, Hugh Wolff, Marc Albrecht, and Simon Rattle. Numerous concert tours have taken the choir to Israel, Spain, and Austria as well as many cities throughout Germany. Since 2009, Steffen Schubert has been Artistic Director of the Ernst Senff Choir.

STAATSKAPELLE WEIMAR

Founded in 1491, the Staatskapelle Weimar is one of the oldest orchestras in Germany and among the most illustrious in the world. Its history is closely associated with some of the world's best-known musicians, including Johann Sebastian Bach, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Franz Liszt, and Richard Strauss. Established as the premier musical institution of classical Weimar and part of the Hoftheater Weimar, the orchestra continued to attract attention through the achievements of Liszt and Strauss during the 19th century. These two celebrated figures not only improved its quality and reputation, but also led the Hofkapelle in world premieres of numerous contemporary orchestral works and operas.

These positive developments were brought to an abrupt end when the National Socialists seized power. After the calamitous events of World War II, conductor Hermann Abendroth re-established the Staatskapelle Weimar, restoring it to its former grandeur and quality. Since the 1980s, conductors Peter Gülke, Oleg Caetani, and Hans-Peter Frank as well as the current honorary conductor George Alexander Albrecht, who led the orchestra from 1996 to 2002, have left a lasting mark. In the following years, Albrecht was succeeded by Jac van Steen, Carl St. Clair, Stefan Solyom, and most recently by Kirill Karabits, who took the reins of Thuringia's only A-level orchestra in September 2016.

Both in its extensive concert activities and its opera productions at the Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar, the Staatskapelle has worked to cultivate its great tradition while also combining it with innovation. A wide range of CD recordings reflect its impressively diverse repertoire. World-class soloists and conductors perform regularly with the Staatskapelle Weimar, which is nationally and internationally renowned as a top-level concert orchestra. In past years, the ensemble has made guest appearances in Japan, Israel, Spain, Italy, Great Britain, Switzerland, and Austria as well as at renowned festivals and major concert halls throughout Germany.

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KIRILL KARABITS

Since September 2016, Ukrainian-born Kirill Karabits has held the position of General Music Director and Principal Conductor of the Deutsches Nationaltheater and Staatskapelle Weimar. In addition, since 2008 he assumes the position of Chief Conductor of Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

Kirill Karabits has worked with many of the leading ensembles of Europe, Asia and North America, including the Cleveland, Philadelphia and San Francisco Symphony Orchestras, Philharmonia Orchestra, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra Filarmonica del Teatro La Fenice, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and the Münchner Philharmoniker. In 2016, he conducted the Russian National Orchestra on their tour of the US and in two concerts at the Edinburgh International Festival. Summer 2016 also saw his debut with the Chicago Symphony at the Ravinia Festival. A prolific opera conductor, Kirill Karabits has conducted at Glyndebourne Festival Opera, English National Opera and the Bolshoi Theatre. He also conducted at the Wagner Geneva Festival, and recently returned to the Staatsoper Hamburg. The 2016-17 season saw his debuts at both the Deutsche Oper and the Oper Stuttgart.

Working with the next generation of bright musicians is of great importance to Kirill Karabits. Thus he commits himself as Artistic Director of I, CULTURE Orchestra, an orchestra of talented, young musicians from Poland and other East European countries. In 2012 and 2014 he conducted the televised finals of the BBC Young Musician of the Year Award.

In recognition of his achievements in the UK, Kirill Karabits was named Conductor of the Year at the 2013 Royal Philharmonic Society Music Awards.

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e-mail: info@audite.de
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Kunst Fest Weimar

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